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Babbin, Anna, "A Qualitative Study of School-Based Sexuality Education State Policies and LGBTQ+ Student Experiences in Sex Ed" (2018). *Honors Scholar Theses*. 560.
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**A Qualitative Study of School-Based Sexuality Education State Policies
and LGBTQ+ Student Experiences in Sex Ed**

Anna Babbin

University of Connecticut Honors Thesis, Spring 2018

Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies

Abstract

Objective: To assess the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in school-based sexuality education and compare responses of students from states with inclusive (Oregon and California) and non-inclusive (Alabama and Texas) sex education policies.

Participants: 669 LGBTQ+ students between 13-17 years of age.

Main Outcome Measures: Student write-in responses about the inclusion of queer sexual orientations and gender identity topics in their school-based sex education.

Analysis: LGBTQ+ student write-in responses about their experiences in sex education were reviewed for themes using qualitative methods, and themes were compared across states.

Results: The majority of LGBTQ+ students living in Alabama and Texas report receiving non-inclusive and discriminatory sex education. In contrast, LGBTQ+ students living in Oregon and California report that they were not outwardly discriminated against; however, they were still not provided adequate, relevant information in their sex education classes.

Conclusions and Implications: Inclusive state-level sex education policies can create a safer classroom environment for LGBTQ+ students, but these policies are still not enough. Policies must be enforced, and teachers must be trained in how to create an inclusive and informative sex education curriculum for *all* students. In order to learn how to have safe sex, LGBTQ+ students need sex education that is relevant to their concerns and meets their needs.

Key words: Sexuality education, sex ed, state policies, LGBTQ+ youth, LGBTQ+ students, inclusive education

Introduction

The first school-based sexuality education (sex ed) curriculum in the United States was developed in 1913 with the founding of the American Social Hygiene Association (Elia & Eliason, 2010a). With rates of marriage on the decline in the United States, the sex ed curriculum began to focus on marital revitalization, wholesome living, and – in order to prevent STI's and prostitution – sexual contact only within marriage (Elia & Eliason, 2010a). Children were (and still are in many cases) taught that healthy sexual expression can only occur between a man and a woman within marriage, which discriminates against those not in the heterosexual man-woman binary, such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) young people.

According to the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), federal funding for sex ed was first established in 1981 under the Reagan Administration with the introduction of The Adolescent Family Life Act (AFLA). Since 1981, two more streams of federal funding have been created: Title V – the abstinence-only-until-marriage portion of the Social Security Act – in 1996 and the Community-Based Abstinence Education (CBAE) grant program in 2000 (SIECUS). Title V established funding specifically for abstinence-only-until-marriage sex ed in public schools (Elia & Eliason, 2010a). This bill was re-authorized in 2001 and 2006; by 2006, \$175 million was being allocated to abstinence-only sex ed (Elia & Eliason, 2010a). In 2008, the level of funding peaked at \$177 million (guttmacher.org). Under the Obama Administration, Congress reduced federal funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage sex ed programs, but under the Trump Administration in 2017, Congress raised the annual funding from \$55 million to \$85 million (guttmacher.org).

Research suggests that LGBTQ+ youth are especially affected by this non-inclusive form of sex ed; they feel invisible, ashamed, and confused in their heteronormative health classes (Fisher, 2009). Given that LGBTQ+ youth experience sexual health disparities compared to their

heterosexual peers, it is critical to examine the abstinence-only-until-marriage sex ed model and find out what LGBTQ+ youth want and need to learn in their sex ed classes (Gowen & Winges-Yanez, 2014).

The Harm of Abstinence-Only-Until-Marriage Sex Ed for LGBTQ+ Youth

Abstinence-only-until-marriage sex ed is especially discriminatory toward LGBTQ+ students. There is evidence that queer identities are hardly mentioned in U.S. sex ed classrooms, and if they are, the community is often associated with AIDS (Fisher, 2009). Teachers oftentimes tell their students that non-heterosexual sex “causes an especially high risk of HIV infection” because “body openings are used in ways for which they were not designed” (Fisher, 2009). This statement not only shames sexual intercourse between same-sex and same-gender individuals, but it is also medically inaccurate; for example, gonorrhea is actually the most common STI among LGBTQ+ individuals (Fisher, 2009). Instead of falsely linking queer people with AIDS, sex ed teachers need to be teaching accurate information on how to be protected against STIs while engaging in any type of sexual behavior. Telling students that gay sex will lead to AIDS is an example of a scare tactic that specifically targets queer people. In abstinence-only-until-marriage sex ed, teachers use scare tactics to scare their students out of having sex (but especially queer sex). They teach students that sex before marriage will lead to infection, death, or the responsibility of raising a child (Pingel et al, 2013).

Research has found that the information presented on sexual orientation in sex ed classrooms is often inaccurate and attacks the LGBTQ community; but many schools do not present any information on sexual orientation at all (guttmacher.org). There is evidence that the lack of relatable information can make LGBTQ+ students feel invisible and invalid. In Fisher’s 2009 study, one interviewee named Jose, age 21, said, “It’s like, well, you know, shit, if you

aren't represented when they talk about human sexuality – you're not human." The assumption of heterosexuality and the dismissal of homosexuality can cause LGBTQ+ students to feel invalid as humans. Students may feel forced to suppress their sexual feelings in order to fit in with the majority, which has been associated with increased risk of suicide (Fisher, 2009).

Elia and Eliason (2010a) categorize the current school-based sex ed program to be unethical, uncaring, and undemocratic. They argue that current sex ed programs deny youth agency over their own sexual health by controlling what information they receive; and this information is usually based in fundamentalist Christian values that maintain heteronormativity and excludes the realities of sexual pluralism (Elia & Eliason, 2010a). Accepting one's sexual orientation and gender identity is a core aspect of sexual health, but the current sex ed curriculum does not promote acceptance (Mustanski et al, 2014). Furthermore, comprehensive sex ed is not only important for LGBTQ+ students, but it is important for *every* student, regardless of sexuality or gender identity. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, 15-24 year olds represent 25 percent of the sexually active population in the United States, but they acquire half of all new STIs. Young males' infections often go undiagnosed because they are less likely to show symptoms or seek medical care (ncsl.org). Discussing the different types of STIs and their symptoms, how they are spread, and how to be protected from them will be beneficial to all students.

Importance of Accurate Sex Ed for LGBTQ+ Youth

Not only is LGBTQ+ inclusive sex ed important because every child deserves correct sexual information that applies to their own lives, but also, LGBTQ+ youth are more at-risk to experience sexual health disparities when compared to heterosexual youth. Gowen and Wings-Yanez (2014) interviewed thirty LGBTQ+ students in Oregon and found that LGBTQ+ youth are

more likely to report being sexually active than heterosexual youth. LGBTQ+ youth also report earlier initiation of sexual intercourse and sex with higher numbers of sexual partners.

Additionally, LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to have been under the influence of alcohol or drugs during their last sexual encounter. For transgender youth specifically, Gowen and Winges-Yanez report they were more likely to engage in unprotected sex and survival sex. Survival sex is the act of trading sex for cash, food, shelter, or other basic needs. This is consistent with research by the True Colors Fund which documented that LGBTQ+ individuals are over-represented within the homeless youth population (“New Study Sheds Light,” 2015). For these young people, survival sex is a way to make money and stay alive. Because LGBTQ+ youth are more likely to engage in all of these types of risky sexual behavior – survival sex, unprotected sex, sex while under the influence, etc. – it is especially important that they learn how to have safer sex.

The lack of inclusive sex ed may be one reason why LGBTQ+ youth are engaging in risky sexual behavior. They attend classes centered on heterosexual sex and relationships, giving queer youth almost no information to which they can relate. In addition to risky sexual behavior, non-inclusive heteronormative sex ed has been connected to other potential consequences for LGBTQ+ youth. Elia and Eliason (2010a) examined these potential consequences. They suggest that the lack of positive attention to LGBTQ+ issues in sex ed can lead to higher use of drugs and alcohol and increased rates of depression with resulting higher rates of suicide ideation and attempts. Additionally, GPA and school success can be negatively impacted. Elia and Eliason ask, “Are [LGBTQ+ youth] able to overcome the challenges, or do the negative consequences of secondary education carry into adulthood for some of these individuals?” More research is needed to answer this question.

Where do LGBTQ+ Students Get Relevant Information about Sex?

There is evidence that LGBTQ+ youth are not learning what they need to know from their heteronormative sex ed classes. So, where are these students turning for information? From ten in-depth qualitative interviews with lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals, Estes (2016) found that the Internet is one of the most popular ways to gather information lacking in sex ed. Finding information on the Internet has been linked to queer youth feeling empowered by being taught how to take control of their sexuality and sexual health. Some youth find they do not feel “talked down to” on the Internet, and the information is not based in scare tactics (Gowen & Winges-Yanez, 2014). Some examples of popular websites used by LGBTQ+ students are the National Institutes of Health, Mayo Clinic, CNN, and WebMD. The websites of LGBTQ+ resource centers at universities have also been found to be useful, accurate, and unbiased (Pingel et al, 2013). LGBTQ+ youth also use the popular media to learn about their sexuality; for example, they may imitate gay characters. One risk in this is that the portrayal of the queer community in mainstream media is not always accurate or positive (Estes, 2016). In addition to the Internet and media, Estes found that LGBTQ+ students often turn to porn for information (Estes, 2016). Again, this source of information is problematic because its depiction of sex is not necessarily safe or healthy.

If comprehensive school-based sex ed is not accessible, LGBTQ+ students can turn to young adult literature, which has increasingly prevalent representations of queer young people and queer relationships (Bittner, 2012). LGBTQ+ youth can use young adult literature as a supplementary source of sex ed. Bittner found that this platform was a less intimidating way for young people to find information regarding their own sexuality than one-on-one discussions with teachers or parents who may hold prejudices against queer sexualities. In young adult literature,

there are passages on sex, masturbation, desire, and erotic descriptions of bodies – all in nonclinical language, unlike sex ed textbooks. Even heterosexual youth can learn about queer sexuality from this literature, which may reduce false ideas of homosexuality and homophobia (Bittner 2012). These nuanced descriptions of adolescent sexual exploration in a non-heteronormative way allows queer youth to learn about their own sexual health and potential experiences.

Designing Inclusive Sex Ed

In order to create a new comprehensive and inclusive sex ed curriculum, we must ask LGBTQ+ youth what they would like to see in their classrooms. In a study consisting of 30 interviews with young, gay, bisexual, and questioning men in Michigan, Pingel et al (2013) found that the mechanics of sex – specifically anal sex – was something missing from their school-based sex ed experience. Gay youth want their sex ed to be more inclusive of LGBTQ+ people, which means presenting an honest portrayal of sexual behaviors beyond vaginal-penile sex. Pingel et al (2013) also found that gay youth feel like they missed out on an opportunity to learn how to defend themselves to their parents. One gay adolescent “believed that contextualizing sex ed with non-sexual LGBT history would have been beneficial in showing his parents that a gay identity involves more than sexual activity” (296). Furthermore, gay youth want more discussion on the range of sexual possibilities, how STIs are contracted, and how STIs differ from one another. They also commented on who they think should teach sex ed; teachers should resemble the students, and people with STIs should teach using their own experiences (Pingel et al, 2013).

In Gowen and Wings-Yanez’s study (2014) of 30 LGBTQ+ participants from Oregon, more suggestions for inclusive sex ed were outlined: Many participants wanted direct discussions

of LGBTQ+ issues – such as gender identity and sexual orientation spectrums and gender roles – as well as STI prevention over pregnancy prevention and healthy relationships. They also think all teachers should take a course on gender and sexuality. If teachers understood the wide range of sexual possibilities, they would be able to better instill acceptance and safety within the classroom (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014). If lawmakers and teachers listened to young LGBTQ+ youth, they would see that their current sex ed curriculum is failing them. These studies indicate that queer youth want and need information on STI prevention, including how to use condoms and dental dams, as well as information on healthy versus unhealthy relationships, the emotional (instead of just sexual) aspect of relationships, and how to effectively communicate within a relationship in order to engage in safe sex. Access to resources is also important to queer youth; they appreciate teachers who hand out pamphlets and suggest educational websites (Gowen & Wings-Yanez, 2014).

Some teachers are uncomfortable discussing queer topics, or they hold negative attitudes toward homosexuality, which can negatively affect the experiences of LGBTQ+ youth. Their own religious views may affect how they incorporate (or do not incorporate) homosexuality into the curriculum (Estes, 2016). One solution for teachers and administrators to feel safer about allowing LGBTQ+ and other inclusive topics into their school's sex ed is through the program *AMP!* – an art-based, multiple-intervention, near-peer education program aimed at ninth graders (Gordon & Gere, 2016). *AMP!* is made up of students from UCLA, who participate in *AMP!* as a regular academic course. All material in the program is reviewed by the Los Angeles Unified School District HIV/AIDS Prevention Unit before being shared and performed in high schools, which ensures that all information is accurate. And not only does the Prevention Unit review the

curriculum, but it also supports the teachers and talks to any concerned parents (Gordon & Gere, 2016).

This last aspect is what sets *AMP!* aside from other inclusive sex ed programs. By answering the teachers and parents' questions, they become more educated in why comprehensive and inclusive school-based sex ed is so important for their children. Planned Parenthood has outlined guidelines for comprehensive sex ed, but they do not give guidance to schools on how to implement these guidelines and create a better school environment for LGBTQ+ students (Elia & Eliason, 2010b).

Parents and Sex Ed

Often, if a student asks a question about a gay topic in class, teachers will tell the student to ask their parents (Estes, 2016). But what if their parents are reluctant or refuse to address homosexuality? Mustanski et al conducted the first study to demonstrate the feasibility, acceptability, and initial efficacy of an online comprehensive sexual health program for LGBTQ+ youth. They found evidence to suggest that parents play a critical role in their children's sexual health development, but many parents will stay silent if they are unaware or unwilling to acknowledge their child's sexual orientation. Mothers often assume their child is heterosexual and promote heterosexuality as the norm, and fathers try to project heterosexuality onto their children, especially their sons. (Estes, 2016). Furthermore, some parents incorrectly believe their children are already receiving sex ed at school, so they do not feel the need to provide further education (Estes, 2016). This further emphasizes the importance of appropriate sex ed in schools for LGBTQ+ youth.

Current State Policies on Sex Ed

Today, in order to receive federal sex ed funding, schools must follow certain guidelines: sex ed programs must stress that physical, social, and psychological health are best achieved by abstaining from sex before marriage, and indicate that sex outside of marriage causes physical and psychological harm (Elia & Eliason, 2010b). Federal funding associated with abstinence-only programs also requires schools to teach that pregnancy out of wedlock is deleterious to the child, parents, and society; one must reject sexual advances; alcohol and drugs increases one's vulnerability and decreases one's ability to uphold abstinence; and it is critical to achieve self-sufficiency before getting involved in sexual activity. The expected norm for the student body is abstinence, heterosexuality, and mutually faithful relationships within the context of marriage (Elia & Eliason, 2010b). The only piece of information based in fact within the American sex ed curriculum is that abstinence is the only way to guarantee the prevention of pregnancy and STI's.

As for the inclusivity of LGBTQ+ issues, the Guttmacher Institute reports that three states – Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas – accept federal funding and require that their sex ed curriculum teaches only negative information on sexual orientation. Arizona cannot promote a homosexual lifestyle or portray homosexuality in a positive manner, and Oklahoma teaches that homosexual activity is connected to AIDS (guttmacher.org). In response to concerns about abstinence-only sex ed, sixteen states have now opted out of funding from the federal government. In addition, nine states – California, Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington – require positive information on sexual orientation (guttmacher.org). The current comprehensive sex ed model, which California was the first state to adopt, grew out of the Sexuality Information Education Council of the United States (SIECUS) (Elia & Eliason, 2010b). SIECUS is an organization that advocates for comprehensive sex ed and accurate information on sexuality and sexual health. It asserts that “all people have a

right to comprehensive sexuality education that addresses the socio-cultural, biological, psychological, and spiritual dimensions of sexuality” (Elia & Eliason, 2010b).

While California’s sex ed is comprehensive, it can still be more inclusive. According to Elia and Eliason (2010b), sex ed can fall into five categories – no education, abstinence-only, abstinence-based, comprehensive, and anti-oppressive. Since California does not accept federal funding for abstinence-only sex ed and it includes LGBTQ+ issues in its curriculum, California’s sex ed would fall under the comprehensive category; however, in order to reach the highest level of sex ed – anti-oppressive – California must take an intersectional approach. Issues of race, disability, class, gender, and sexual orientation all must be covered in order to make every student feel welcome and deserving of healthy sex and relationships.

In sum, twelve states in the U.S. have specific laws regarding LGBTQ+ inclusivity in sex ed classes. In three states – Alabama, South Carolina, and Texas – information on sexual orientation in sex ed must be presented negatively. Furthermore, these three states as well as Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Oklahoma have “no promo homo laws,” which limit or prohibit the discussion of homosexuality in any class, including sex education. On the other hand, nine states – California, Colorado, Delaware, Iowa, New Jersey, New Mexico, Oregon, Rhode Island, and Washington – require information on sexual orientation in sex ed to be presented positively.

This Study

The current literature suggests that many LGBTQ+ students do not receive adequate sex ed in public schools. In addition, there is considerable variability in the policies regulating sex ed across states in the U.S. To date, there has been little research on the impact of state-level sex education policies on the experiences of sex education by LGBTQ+ youth. Therefore, the aim of

the current study is to examine the overall experiences in sex ed for LGBTQ+ youth in two states that actively *encourage* positive LGBTQ+ sex ed, and compare these experiences to student in two states that actively *discourage* positive LGBTQ+ sex ed. I hypothesize that (a) students living in states with policies that actively discourage positive LGBTQ+ sex education will report receiving more negative than positive messages about being LGBTQ+, and (b) students living in states that have policies to promote positive LGBTQ+ education will report receiving more positive than negative messages about being LGBTQ+.

Methods

Study Design and Participation Recruitment

All data were taken from the 2017 LGBTQ+ National Teens Survey – a comprehensive survey intended to increase understanding of victimization, health behaviors, school experiences, and family relationships of LGBTQ+ teens from a perspective of intersectionality. In partnership with the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), data were collected between April and December of 2017. At the time of survey completion, all survey respondents were English-speaking, 13-17 years old, resided in the United States, and identified as LGBTQ+. These LGBTQ+ teens were invited to participate in this survey through an online, anonymous, self-report survey hosted by Qualtrics.com.

Participants were recruited through social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Reddit. Social influencers (e.g. Tyler Oakley, Jazz Jennings) shared the survey link through their social media profiles, and the HRC's extensive network of community partners (e.g. Youth Link, Trevor Project, Advocates for Youth, Planned Parenthood, Big Brother/Big Sisters) assisted in recruiting participants through Facebook statuses, 140-character Twitter messages, e-mail, and direct communication. One tweet, which also included the

Qualtrics link, read: “Health HRC and UConn researchers speak out for the next generation of LGBTQ++ teens.” Some advertisements included pictures of diverse young teens. Participants of the survey were able to enter a random drawing for one of 10 Amazon.com gift cards, and all respondents were mailed a 6-pack of HRC wristbands to their provided address.

Measures

The online survey included a series of self-report questionnaires which assessed the following topics: gender, sexuality, ethnoracial identity, health behaviors (e.g. physical activity, eating behaviors, substance use), school experiences (e.g. achievement, safety, bullying), identity disclosure (e.g. being “out” in various contexts), sexuality-specific experiences (e.g. LGBTQ+ racism, bias-based victimization, microaggressions), and family experiences (e.g. acceptance, rejection, support). When beginning the survey, participants were asked to provide demographic information – age, race/ethnicity, state of residence, living situation, parental/caregiver education, religion, sex/gender identity, and disability status. Most survey measures were adapted or validated from already existing measures (e.g. Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance surveys, National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent to Adult Health) in order to create opportunities for a direct comparison to cisgender and heterosexual teens.

Measures were organized into blocks based on topic areas (e.g. school experiences, bullying, substance abuse), which were presented randomly for each participant (apart from demographic questions at the beginning of the survey). The University of Connecticut’s Institutional Review Board approved all study protocols. Participant completion of the survey averaged at 43.3 minutes (median = 28.2 minutes). Additionally, the diversity and size of this sample allowed for the unique chance to examine within group variability (e.g. sex assigned at

birth, sexual/gender minority status, race/ethnicity) while still ensuring adequate statistical ability to test differences across groups.

The current study focused on student responses to an open-ended question: “We are interested in what messages and information about being LGBTQ+ are being taught in sex ed programs. How have LGBTQ+ topics been discussed, if at all, in your classes?” Students were able to write as much or as little as they wanted to answer this question.

Data Screening and Cleaning Procedures

In total, 29,291 youth between the ages of 13 and 17 and across the U.S. entered the survey website (e.g. consent page), and within these respondents, 8,985 (30.67%) were not eligible to complete the survey because they a) were not between 13 and 17 years old, b) did not live in the U.S., and/or c) did not identify as a sexual and/or gender minority. 20,306 participants were eligible and began the survey. Among those eligible, 3,0006 (14/8%) completed up to 10% of the survey (i.e. did not answer all demographic items) and were thus omitted from data analysis.

A multi-step consent and sorting priori method prevented ineligible responders and *bots* from filling out the survey, which included a response tree protocol to divert ineligible participants by age or country of residence. A post hoc mischievous responder’s sensitivity analysis (i.e. non-LGBT individuals who participated in the survey or misleading or extreme values on multiple questions; see Robinson-Cimpian, 2014) was also conducted on the data from qualified responders (n = 17,300) who completed at least 10% of the survey in order to recognize and remove problematic cases (n = 74). Additionally, researchers examined open-ended responses to delete suspicious entries not captured by the screening process (e.g. using expletives for gender identity or referring to oneself as Donald Trump; n = 79). If a participant failed to

finish the survey and then re-started a new survey, both surveys were deleted (n = 22). 17,112 participants completed at least 10% of the survey and were not screened out as mischievous. A smaller proportion of the sample (n = 12,005) completed at least half of the survey, and 9,460 completed the survey. In total, 175 cases were deleted through this cleaning process.

Selecting the Current Sample

The current sample was drawn from the surveys completed by youth living in Alabama (n = 167), Texas (n = 1089), Oregon (n = 166), and California (n = 1151). These states were selected because two (Oregon and California) were inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities in their laws regarding sex ed, whereas the other two (Alabama and Texas) are discriminatory rather than inclusive. Respondents who did not answer the open-ended question about the messages they received in sex ed were excluded, leaving 133 subjects from Alabama and 136 from Oregon. Because the samples from California and Texas were significantly larger, a random sample of 200 surveys was selected from each of these states, resulting in a final sample of 669 participants.

Results

Participant Characteristics

The racial/ethnic profile of the respondents from the 4 states included in the study was: White (47.5%), Hispanic/Latino (22.5%), Biracial or Multiracial (16.4%), Asian (7.1%), Black (3.6%), Native American (0.6%), and Other (2.3%). All of the students were between the ages of 13 and 17, with the following frequencies for each age: 17 (28.8%), 16 (26.8%), 15 (21.2%), 14 (15.5%), and 13 (7.9%). When asked to describe their sexual identity, 36.1% said they were gay or lesbian, 37.3% bisexual, 1.5% straight/heterosexual, and 25% identified as something else. When asked to describe their gender identity, 24.2% said they identified as a cisgender male,

45.6% as a cisgender female, 7.2% as a transgender male, 1.1% as a transgender female, 19.8% as transmasculine/non-binary, and 2.1% as transfeminine/non-binary.

Analyses

Participant responses to the open-ended questions were reviewed for each state, and themes were identified. The finding from each state are presented below.

Alabama

Alabama law states that sex education materials and instruction must place “an emphasis, in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under the laws of the state” (lambdalegal.org). Additionally, Alabama allows religion to be promoted within the sex ed curriculum of public schools (gutmacher.org).

The majority of students living in Alabama reported that LGBTQ+ topics have never been brought up or discussed in their sex ed classes. Students report that in the rare occasion that sexual orientation is mentioned, the topic is presented in a rude manner. There are very few examples of Alabama students who had positive sex ed experiences, especially in regard to the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics.

Students report that they learned “just the typical hetero stuff” in sex ed. The only type of sex discussed is the heteronormative man-woman or penis-vagina sex. When LGBT people are brought up, it is in relation to STDs. Teachers reiterate the fact that both gay and straight people can get STDs, and therefore everyone needs to use protection. Students report that abstinence is also pushed – for both gay and straight people. While sex ed in Alabama sometimes includes queer identities in the discussion of STDs and abstinence, this type of representation is hardly positive. One student wrote:

The teacher discussed a man cheating on his wife with another man. The man in the story got AIDs from the other man and he died. When I asked the teacher why he used a gay man as an example he said, 'Gays always get AIDS.'

In Alabama, sex ed teachers often equate being gay with having AIDS. Additionally, while students may learn that LGBT people can get STDs, there is a lack of education regarding how LGBT people can use contraception and have safe sex. A lesbian student wrote, “I never feel like I’ve learned anything about safe lesbian sex.” This student knows she should be having safe sex, but she never learned how in her sex ed class.

Students indicate that religion is one reason why LGBT topics are not brought up in sex ed classes. They explain that, in Christianity, homosexuality is viewed as a sin, and because Alabama allows religion to be promoted in their schools, students report teachers projecting their own homophobia onto their students. Students describe how teachers connect words such as “disease” and “unnatural” with homosexuality. Even when LGBT topics are brought up by the students, they are often ignored by the teachers. One student reports:

About once a term we have focus days and on one of them last year, in one of the topics LGBTQ+ came up and we did talk about it a little but the teacher was obviously a bit uncomfortable with talking about it to us.

Even when LGBTQ+ topics are not demonized, they are almost never talked about openly and positively. Teachers are uncomfortable with and do not fully understand LGBTQ+ topics.

LGBTQ+ kids are often bullied for trying to bring up queer topics. For example, one student reports:

[LGBTQ+ topics] have never been discussed. Ever. When I asked about two men or two women having sexual intercourse, people would look at me weird and call me names,

such as Weirdo, Faggot, Dyke, Psychotic. It sucks ass. When I first asked about it, I got sent to the counselor since the topic could lead to 'children being uncomfortable.'

This student was not receiving any relevant information, and when they attempted to open a discussion on queer sex, they were immediately shut down by both classmates and the school administration. Because of Alabama's negative sex ed policies and teachers' own prejudice, queer students not only feel ignored in their sex classes, but they also may become victims of bullying. Overall, the experiences reported by LGBTQ+ students living in Alabama is overwhelmingly negative. Heteronormativity is the standard in their sex ed classes, and queer topics are rarely even mentioned. When they are, teachers will often demonize homosexuality.

Texas

Texas does not require public schools to teach sex education (gutmacher.org). When sex ed is taught, Texas law states, "Course materials and instruction relating to sexual education or sexually transmitted diseases should include: emphasis, provided in a factual manner and from a public health perspective, that homosexuality is not a lifestyle acceptable to the general public and that homosexual conduct is a criminal offense under Section 21.06, Penal Code" (lambdalegal.org). Also, like Alabama, Texas allows public schools to promote religion in their sex ed classes (gutmacher.org). Religion – especially Christianity – plays a large role in how LGBTQ+ topics are presented in Texas public schools. Students report sex ed teachers calling homosexuality evil, dangerous, dirty, and disrespectful to the body. One student states:

Most of my teachers avoid talking about sexuality, but sometimes my "die-hard Christian" teachers will bring it up in a negative way, like an example as to how humanity has driven itself further away from doing the 'right things.'

Whether a student has a Christian teacher or goes to a Catholic school, both often use religion to drive their teaching (or lack of teaching) on LGBTQ+ identities and topics.

Like religion, heteronormativity affects if and how LGBTQ+ topics are presented in sex ed. Heteronormativity causes sex ed to be tailored toward heterosexual students and erases queer identities. Texas students report that safe sex is only presented in heteronormative ways and that “heteronormativity is too strong” in Texas for the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics in sex ed. Many Texas students report they were never taught how to have safe sex as a queer person. One student details her lack of education on how to have safe sex as a lesbian:

[LGBTQ+ topics] aren't discussed at all unless someone asks a question about it. When someone does, the adult makes it sound disgusting and the students say terrible things.

They just briefly describe how it happens without talking about protections from diseases.

So, I have no idea how to have safe sex with another woman.

Another student believed they could not “get STDs from having sex with the same sex.” Often, sex ed teachers will not clearly state that people of all sexualities can contract STDs and only discuss safe sex techniques in a heteronormative context.

Most students report that LGBTQ+ topics were never discussed in their sex ed classes. If LGBTQ+ topics were mentioned, it was either in a discriminatory way (One student reports their teaching saying that “LGBT is not natural and will lead to pain and death.”) or in the context of history or current events such as the Stonewall Riots, the AIDS epidemic, gay marriage, and transgender bathrooms laws. Gayness is often associated with AIDS in Texas sex ed classrooms, with some students reporting that they were taught that gay people always have AIDs or that gay people can get HIV from gay sex even if neither person is HIV positive. These negative portrayals of the LGBTQ+ community force queer students to defend themselves and their

identity, which can lead to bullying and name-calling. One student wrote, “Kids get called fags in my classes and sometimes I’m afraid to stand up for the kids.” Even if teachers wanted to create an inclusive sex ed curriculum, Texas law and complaints from parents prohibit the teaching of LGBTQ+ topics. One student wrote:

The school I go to is, overall, pretty liberal, but since we still must abide by the guidelines set by the Texas legislature, LGBTQ+ topics are rarely mentioned and often avoided. My teachers aren't subtle about being liberal but they don't want to piss off parents and lose their jobs so they won't discuss controversial issues.

Some sex ed teachers in Texas have told their classes “that they accept the community and have no problem with gay people,” but at the same time, they are unable to give accurate and beneficial information to queer students because of state laws. There is one report of a student learning about dental dams and condoms in the context of safe LGBTQ+ sex. Nevertheless, teachers with positive views of the LGBTQ+ community are the minority. Most queer Texas students report their sex ed as being heteronormative and non-inclusive of their identities. Students must do their own research outside of class if they want to learn about LGBTQ+ and other comprehensive sex ed topics. At best, Texas queer students are accepted in sex ed but not given relevant information, and at worst, LGBTQ+ students are told they are sinful and completely ignored in sex ed.

Oregon

Oregon is one of the few states to provide comprehensive sex ed. State law requires public schools to teach human sexuality as a “normal and healthy aspect of human development” (votesmart.org). Oregon also requires sex ed to be inclusive of all sexual orientations, medically accurate, and culturally appropriate and unbiased (gutmacher.org). However, there is no law

stating religion cannot be promoted (gutmacher.org). Recently, Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski (D) signed House Bill 2509 into law, requiring that public elementary and secondary schools provide “age-appropriate human sexuality education” as an “integral part of the health education curriculum” (siecus.org). Unlike Alabama and Texas, Oregon strives to provide comprehensive sex ed that is inclusive of LGBTQ+ identities. However, in reality, LGBTQ+ topics are still missing in many sex ed classrooms. Many students report never learning about LGBTQ+ identities, while other students report teachers “mostly just saying that it’s fine to be who you want to be.” While it is important for sex ed teachers to openly accept LGBTQ+ students, it is just as important to provide them with necessary sexual information. Student reports include a mix of answers regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ topics. One student reports LGBTQ+ inclusion in their sex ed class:

In health we had a whole LGBT unit where we discussed gender identity and sexual identity. The teacher didn't know everything and needed help from students. My English teacher speaks very openly about LGBT and politics so there will be times when he discusses LGBT with the class.

While the sex ed teacher was not fully educated on LGBTQ+ topics, they were still open to discussing them openly. Oregon teachers who are not sex ed teachers sometimes include positive LGBTQ+ discussions. However, teachers are often not prepared to teach LGBTQ+ topics. Another student reports, “We talked about gender and sexuality briefly, but the teacher had very little knowledge.” A few students mention how they had groups such as the GSA come into their sex ed classes to present on queer identities and LGBTQ+ sex. Members of the GSA acted as resources for LGBTQ+ people as well as for teachers who want to learn how to be inclusive.

There are very few Oregon students who describe a *fully* positive and inclusive experience in sex ed. While many teachers are accepting of LGBTQ+ identities, heterosexuality still dominates the narrative. Many students report learning that condoms can be used during gay sex as well as straight sex, but the discussion of LGBTQ+ topics and identities ends there. One student reports:

As a gay man I asked the Sex educator about condoms...his response was talk of condoms is inappropriate... I go to a private Catholic school that views LGBTQ+ Sex as taboo and a sin and it makes me feel uneducated about my own sexuality.

Religion is still used to discriminate against LGBTQ+ identities in the sex ed classroom, despite state laws requiring inclusivity. Especially in Catholic schools, LGBTQ+ topics are seen as unnatural, unacceptable, and shameful.

Overall, in Oregon, queer students have a range of experiences in sex ed. Some students report learning extensively about queer identities, but most report hearing positive comments from their sex ed teachers without learning any relevant information. Other students had completely negative experiences in sex ed. Queer identities are ignored or presented in a negative light, especially in Catholic schools. There are many responses from students saying they learned how to have safe sex as a queer person, but just as many students said they received no information on how to have safe queer sex. One student believes the “lack of education unintentionally conveys a negative connotation” in regard to LGBTQ+ people. Another student reports:

In my health class, we really only talked about penis + vagina sex. At one point a person who worked for the county's health system came in for a special program called R.E.A.L....where we talked for ONE day about non straight/non cis identities but nothing

about safe non penis + vagina sex. So really the whole day was useless because it was an opportunity for my classmates to talk about how "lesbians are only gay because they were abused by men" (real statement by this straight white girl) and otherwise how they don't support non cis/non straight people.

While another student reports:

During sex education, the class treated safe sex as an LGBTQ+ person the same as they did heterosexuals. The class stated that the same principles applied to LGBTQ+ sex as it did heterosexual sex; use condoms, get tested, practice safe sex.

These two responses differ greatly. The first student reports a heteronormative sex ed experience, even when a special program presented on non-straight identities. The second student's response is one of the few fully positive and inclusive experiences of all Oregon students. So, while Oregon sex ed policies are comprehensive and inclusive of LGBTQ+ people, this does not always translate to class. Still, there were more positive queer student experiences in Oregon than in Alabama or Texas.

California

California is another state with a comprehensive sex ed curriculum. State policy requires sex ed to be inclusive of all sexual orientations. It "[recognizes] that there are individual differences in growth and development, physical appearance, gender roles, and sexual orientation" (cde.ca.gov). California also recognizes "diversity among people, including disability, gender, race, sexual orientation, and body size" within their sex ed curriculum (cde.ca.gov). Unlike Alabama, Texas, and Oregon, California explicitly states that sex ed cannot promote religion in any way (guttmacher.org). Nevertheless, California students still report that "LGBTQ+ [topics have] never really come up in any of my classes." Other students report that

LGBTQ+ identities are accepted, but no informative or accurate information is presented on LGBTQ+ topics or queer sex – similar to what Oregon students reported. There were very few reports of blatantly negative experiences in sex ed except in the context of sex ed in Christian or Catholic schools. One student reports:

I went to a Christian school and had Christian sex Ed. The only year anything related to the LGBTQ+ community was mentioned was in seventh grade. The woman who came to speak to us said ‘at public schools we have to teach about gay relationships, but as Christians we know that god only made sex for a man and a woman.’

This presentation is a direct violation of state legislation. Another student reports that their sex ed teacher does not believe that certain sexual orientations exist, such as polyamory. There are several reports from students saying that LGBTQ+ identities are “completely ignored or forgotten. If any students ask they would be at risk of the entire class making fun of them.” Despite comprehensive sex ed policies, many California students report LGBTQ+ topics being nonexistent in sex ed.

Heteronormativity still exists in California sex ed, and heterosexual sex is discussed far more often than queer sex. Students report not receiving adequate information on how to have safe sex as an LGBTQ+ person. One student writes, “We discussed...being LGBTQ+, but not anything related to how LGBTQ+ people have sex” and another says “...most lessons focus directly on binary and heteronormative relations in both the emotional and sexual world.” The majority of students report that their sex ed classes do not outwardly discriminate against LGBTQ+ people, but there is still a lack of relevant information for queer students. These students want more. One student reports:

[LGBTQ+ topics] have not been discussed beyond general statements telling students to respect others regardless of race, gender, background, and/or sexual orientation.

Many queer students appreciate the openness in their sex ed classes, but they are still not satisfied with the information presented to them. A couple topics queer students wish were discussed are pleasure and sex for non-reproductive reasons.

There are also reports of LGBTQ+ topics being completely dismissed:

[LGBTQ+ topics] were avoided at all cost. And only taught/talked about when Aids/STDs came into the equation. The class was taught that's LGBTQ++ people (most gay men) brought Aids to everyone. I was also made fun of/disgraced for being openly gay to most students at school. I was bullied in class & the teacher acted liked nothing was happening. Nothing educational, informative, and kind was taught about LGBTQ++ people."

This queer student not only learned nothing relevant in their sex ed class, but they were also bullied. A trans student describes a similarly non-informative and discriminatory sex ed experience:

I'm trans, and I have zero clue about how to have sex as a trans person. I understand fundamentally about genitalia and such, but I don't know how that changes as I take hormones, or depending on who my sexual partner is. I don't know how to deal with things such as dysphoria during sex, and I don't know how to talk to a sexual partner about that either.

Sex as a trans person is almost never discussed in sex ed. Additionally, the existence of asexual and aeromantic people is never acknowledged. Queer students often feel uncomfortable asking

questions about queer identities and sex in fear that the teacher and other students will make fun of them.

While many queer California students report negative experiences in sex ed, some others report positive experiences. Students report learning how to have safe sex as a queer person, including contraception methods and the types of STDs they can contract. One student reports:

Freshman year of high school my classmates and I were required to take an online seminar on the topic of sex. This, along with the standard information about contraceptives, included details about mental health and gender identity and sexuality.

Another student reports how an outside group came into their sex ed class to discuss LGBTQ+ topics:

Well my school hasn't done any classes on sex. However, this non-profit Kid City Hope Place partnered with Planned Parenthood to have sex-ed classes. They talked about protection methods, birth controls, safety in relationships, gender identity, and much more. However, they were inclusive of same sex relationships and never limited to heterosexual relationships which made me feel welcomed.

However, other than these few examples, the overwhelming majority of students report that LGBTQ+ identities are welcomed in sex ed, but the information taught is still in a heteronormative context.

Discussion

Student responses to their school-based sex ed experiences suggest that abstinence-only and non-inclusive state policies, such as those in Alabama and Texas, result in LGBTQ+ topics being ignored or discussed in a rude, non-educational, and discriminatory manner. Inclusive and comprehensive state policies, such as those in Oregon and California, create a more welcoming

and inclusive sex ed environment for queer students, but these students are still not receiving adequate sex ed compared to their heterosexual counterparts. John Elia and Mickey Eliason distinguish between comprehensive sex ed and anti-oppressive sex (2008). Oregon and California's state policies would be considered part of a comprehensive sex ex curriculum. This type of sex ed discusses a range of topics related to sexuality – including risk, pleasure, and LGBTQ+ identities, although there is debate on when children are “ready” to learn about LGBTQ+ issues (Elia & Eliason, 2018). Anti-oppressive sex ed differs from comprehensive sex ed in that it includes the discussion of many types of oppression – sexuality, race, class, education level, gender, disability, etc. – and it acknowledges that human sexuality is not always consistent or easily labeled (Elia & Eliason, 2018).

The U.S. needs anti-oppressive sex ed in their public schools because the comprehensive sex ed curriculum in Oregon and California is still not inclusive enough to LGBTQ+ identities – especially when it comes to educating on queer sex. While some queer students from Oregon report feeling welcomed in the sex ed classroom, teachers “mostly just [say] that it’s fine to be who you want to be” without presenting any information on how to have safe sex and healthy relationships as a queer person. In California, a similar sex ed environment exists. One student reports:

In our workbook, it told different LGBTQ+ terms, but we didn't touch on...anything involving LGBTQ+ topics.

Many California sex ed classrooms validate queer identities as existing, but still do not give queer-specific information on sex. Using an anti-oppressive sex ed curriculum in schools may help to make sex ed more inclusive and informative for all queer identities.

One reason comprehensive sex ed policies in Oregon and California are not creating positive sex ed experiences for LGBTQ+ students may be because teachers are still not educated enough to successfully integrate state policies into their classrooms. A California student reports:

No discussion at all [of LGBTQ+ topics], until a recent hiring of a progressive professor.

She established her own classes in order to inform students, and does so outside of class too when asked.

It is the teacher – not the state policies – that creates an inclusive and safe sex ed environment. Even when comprehensive and inclusive policies are in place, if sex ed teachers do not fully understand sexuality and sexual orientation themselves, their students will not get a proper education.

I agree with Gowen and Wings-Yanez's suggestion that all teachers should take a course on gender and sexuality in order to understand the wide range of sexual possibilities (2014). If teachers are not educated in sexuality, they will not be able to ensure a safe and informative environment for their queer students. Additionally, similar to the findings of Estes (2016), there were several reports of teachers using their own prejudice – especially in connection to religion – to fuel their teachings on LGBTQ+ topics. Both Texas and Alabama allow the promotion of religion in the sex ed classroom. This results in students feeling ostracized and unable to ask for help for fear of bullying from both peers and the teacher. At the same time, some teachers feel personally responsible to teach LGBTQ+ issues, so they include them in their sex ed curriculum. Despite laws against it, a few sex ed teachers from Alabama and Texas are reported to have explicitly stated they support LGBTQ+ students. However, while acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities can lead the way to inclusive teaching of sex ed, it is not enough on its own. Oregon and California classrooms are often accepting of LGBTQ+ identities but do not offer any

relevant information to these queer students. The main sex ed curriculum across all four states is rooted in heteronormativity.

Both queer and non-queer students know that LGBTQ+ issues are not being discussed enough in sex ed. As a result of this, Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) presentations are especially popular in Oregon and California. Students from the GSA teach other students about LGBTQ+ topics, including safe sex, gender identity, sexualities, HIV/AIDS, and pronouns. The GSA allows students to take their sex education into their own hands. There were also reports from students in across all four states of outside educators supplementing the information they received from their sex ed teacher. Guest speakers are an effective way to educate students on LGBTQ+ topics despite the teacher's level of familiarity with queer issues, although some guest speakers invited by the teacher may be chosen to reinforce heteronormativity. Because students know what their peers want, the GSA – educated students teaching their peers – is one of the best ways to supplement the sex education of LGBTQ+ students.

Transgender and lesbian students are particularly ignored and excluded in the sex ed classroom. The heteronormativity that exists in sex ed excludes trans and non-binary people from the conversation, since the focus is on man-woman or penis-vagina sex. A trans California student reports:

I'm trans, and I have zero clue about how to have sex as a trans person. I understand fundamentally about genitalia and such, but I don't know how that changes as I take hormones, or depending on who my sexual partner is. I don't know how to deal with things such as dysphoria during sex, and I don't know how to talk to a sexual partner about that either.

There is also little discussion on how to have safe sex as a lesbian. Dental dams are only reported to have come up in discussion in a few California and Oregon classrooms, despite the importance of using dental dams to have safe sex as a lesbian. Many LGBTQ+ students report not understanding how to have safe sex as a queer person, which can be detrimental to the health and safety of LGBTQ+ students. Men who have sex with men are disproportionately affected by HIV and STDs (cdc.gov). Sex ed should be a place for queer students to learn how to stay safe, but our current sex ed system is failing them.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the current study. The data analyzed were taken from only 4 states, which removes the ability to generalize common response themes across states not included in this study. The number of respondents varies across the 4 states, with Texas and California having hundreds more respondents than Alabama and Oregon. To compensate for this, a random sample was taken from each state; however, the samples for Alabama and Oregon included around 135 participants, whereas the samples for Texas and California included 200 participant responses. Because all data were collected through an online survey, only individuals with Internet access could participate. The survey may not have reached homeless LGBTQ+ youth, a particularly at-risk population. Additionally, because participants were required to identify as LGBTQ+, the survey questions may have inadvertently dissuaded youth who are not yet comfortable with their identity. This could result in the underrepresentation of certain groups within the LGBTQ+ community.

Despite limitations, this study analyzes crucial information about LGBTQ+ youth's experiences in their school-based sex ed classes, which is a topic very few people have studied. If we want schools to be inclusive of all students, information from LGBTQ+ youth can help re-

shape sex ed classes into an informative and safe space. Still, we must continue to strive for inclusive sampling that includes the entire LGBTQ+ community, especially those who are most marginalized.

Conclusion

Overall, Oregon and California had more reports of LGBTQ+ students receiving adequate information in their sex ed classes than students in Alabama and Texas. LGBTQ+ students in Alabama and Texas report more feelings of isolation and discrimination. This is not surprising because Oregon and California's sex ed policies are more comprehensive and inclusive than the policies in Alabama and Texas. Sex ed teachers in Alabama and Texas must present information on sexual orientation in a negative light, whereas sex ed teachers in Oregon and California must be inclusive of all sexualities. These policies are reflected in the responses of students. However, liberal policies are only one variable in the safety and health of LGBTQ+ students. Oregon Governor Ted Kulongoski stated after updating his state's sex ed curriculum policies, "Of course the next battle is to ensure adequate resources are made available to schools so they can fulfill the spirit of the legislation" (siecus.org). There must be up-to-date learning materials, and teachers should be educated on all new material in order for the new legislation to be effective. At the moment, many Oregon LGBTQ+ students feel accepted in their sex ed classrooms, which is extremely important to their mental health. LGBTQ+ teens have higher rates of mental health issues compared to their heterosexual counterparts, so it is especially important for these students to feel safe and welcomed (aappublications.org). Many California LGBTQ+ students feel a similar way in their sex ed classes.

However, while California and Oregon's comprehensive sex ed policies do not outwardly discriminate against LGBTQ+ identities, they still fall short of ensuring accurate, accessible, and

inclusive information to all students. There is a difference between feeling welcomed and feeling safe and well-educated. Many California and Oregon classrooms only ensure the former. In fact, sometimes, these liberal policies do not ensure any discussion of LGBTQ+ issues. The most popular survey response across all four states – Alabama, Texas, Oregon, and California – is that LGBTQ+ issues were never discussed. In the future, we can see how sex ed policies continue to change the sex ed environment in schools. If we continued to study LGBTQ+ youth's experiences in sex ed over time, we could measure if changing policies result in better experiences. Perhaps with inclusive policies, change (i.e., inclusive teaching) can occur more quickly than in states with un-inclusive or discriminatory policies.

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